

## How 2 O.C.-based directors documented rural U.S.A. in 'Hometown Proud'

BY VERA CASTANEDA

**W**hen directors Naida Osline and Tyler Stallings learned that Archer Altstaetter, who lived openly gay for the last 30 years in Orange County, grew up in a rural community he described as white, straight and conservative Christian, they were intrigued. Altstaetter was raised in Botkins, a small village about 50 miles north of Dayton, Ohio. He left for California a day after his high school graduation to pursue a career in dance and opened a studio in Irvine during the late '90s. Through the studio, he produced costumes, sets and choreography for kid's dance as well as nightclubs with go-go dancers, strippers and drag queens. He also became an activist involved in the Orange County Equality

Coalition.

"I am the storm at the beginning of the rainbow," Altstaetter said in the opening scene of the documentary.

He was invited to perform in his hometown's beauty queen pageant and parade.

The feature-length documentary follows Altstaetter as he plans to dance in his own pride float with techno country pop playing in the background.

Interviews with Botkins' residents and Altstaetter's supportive family paint a portrait of what it's like to live openly LGBTQ in a conservative American town during a time when a presidential administration worked to dissolve LGBTQ legal protections at a national level.

The film debuted in the OC Film Fiesta in October, and

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**ARCHER ALTSTAETTER** puts the final touches on his DIY pride float.

Courtesy of Naida Osline and Tyler Stallings

### PROUD

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screenings are continuing through the Anchorage Film Festival (Dec. 4 through 13).

In this edited interview, Osline and Stallings talk about how the film came to be and what it's like shooting in a rural American town.

**Q** How did you meet Archer?

**A** Naida Osline: I met Archer about nine years ago through an art residency I was doing in Santa Ana at the Grand Central Art Center. We became friends, and he became my assistant on projects where it's required that I have somebody that's very outgoing, which Archer is.

Tyler Stallings: As I got to know Archer through Naida, some things I saw when we visited him in Santa Ana is that he had this funky costume shop at one time because he had a big dance studio so he was selling costumes he made. He's very DIY. He still performed at nightclubs. He was a gay rights activist in Santa Ana. He was this kind of amalgam of all these different things. And thinking of him back in his hometown of almost 1,200 people was really intriguing.

**Q** At what point did you decide this is going to be a film? What was the thinking behind deciding to follow Archer?

**A** Osline: I have this project where for the last two years, I've been driving around the country asking Americans to tell me a joke on video. So I have about 300 jokes. Archer has been my helper on that because we set up in these public spaces. So I said to Archer, "I'll drive you back

to Botkins, Ohio, and you can work on your mom's house for a month if you help me with this project." Archer talked a lot about this hometown back in Ohio. Knowing Archer, we just couldn't imagine him in this town. He knew we were interested in pursuing some kind of film. During that time, he was invited to dance in the Miss Carousel Pageant the following year, so I immediately called Tyler and I said, "This is the narrative arc for the story." We were thrilled. I stayed about a month with Archer and did a certain amount of interviews with people like the mayor, the history guy and the woman who runs the pageant. We collected some material in 2018. Then we went back again in 2019 and that's when the story unfolded in terms of the actual events.

**Q** There are a couple of story lines taking place — Archer's story, his niece's story and it's also the story about the town. How did you decide who to interview?

**A** Stallings: That's the fun of it in the editing process. We had 40 hours of footage, between interviews and out in the field. One of the story lines that evolved over time was seeing the family, in many different respects.

Osline: The whole thing was an organic process. We worked through the family, and then there's obvious people to interview like the mayor. The film is about the town, the family, rural America. But for me it's also about the unspoken suppression of anybody that doesn't fit into the narrow lanes of identity defined in a small town or a family. It's about the personal shrapnel that such an experience leaves behind that can lead to things like suicides, substance abuse and isolation.

**Q** During one of the interviews the pageant director, Patty, gets emotional talking about the town. She says that Botkins is full of good people who help each other out while others have a very different take. What do you think was so emotional about the subject for her?

**A** Osline: That "good people" comment is very interesting to me just based on what we're hearing nationally — there's good people here and there. Everybody thinks they're a good person. She became emotional during the interview because I told her Archer is gay, he dances in nightclubs, he's an activist and I asked her how she thought that would fit into the Carousel Pageant and the town. We didn't include a lot of what she said but she didn't want to say the word gay. She finally did, but in a roundabout way. She ends up saying God loves everyone. It was an emotional response to an unanticipated question. Nobody [in the film] really comes out with outright homophobia or racism. It was an uncomfortable moment for her.

Stallings: By being in a small rural community where most people are white, straight Christian — it's a lack of being introduced to diverse people. Suddenly when it's kind of put forward to you in an overt way, it can feel surprising a little bit. We were very careful not to make it an indictment on the town. At the same time, some of the comments speak for themselves.

**Q** One of the repeated phrases when talking about Botkins is "People are accepting up to a point." We see that point shift in generations through Archer and his niece who identifies as a



Courtesy of Naida Osline and Tyler Stallings

**ARCHER ALTSTAETTER** wraps a mini van in rainbow printed paper to create his own LGBTQ Pride float.

lesbian and was a high school student at the time of filming. Archer does question what could cross the line when planning the pride float. Were there any consequences for Archer in his family after the parade?

**A** Osline: There was a certain amount of anxiety that Archer personally felt about doing this. He was very relieved that nobody yelled a slur at him. People didn't want to be on camera talking to us. We saw some looks, but we also saw people cheering.

Stallings: We initially thought it was going to be an activist moment. As we were immersed in the community and then during the editing process, we realized that this is about the importance for Archer to achieve this individual goal and have his family support him. Just by doing the film and Archer being there provided an opportunity for a very public presentation, and the film provides that platform for dialogue.

Osline: But [his nieces] still didn't join Archer during the parade.

**Q** Did they say why they didn't join the parade?

**A** Stallings: Archer made it open that he would like them to join and he invited people. Even though there is a shift, and people

have learned to be more outwardly polite, it doesn't mean that the attitudes have shifted in a deeper way. The suppression still exists so that may be why. Archer is visiting his hometown, but his nieces still have to live there. Maddie certainly has done some very brave things and is very open. Michelle certainly has interesting lightness about how she approaches her [queer identity], so there is that generational shift.

Osline: What's brave in L.A. is different than what's brave in a small town in rural Ohio. It was very brave for Archer to do what he did, even though there was this line that he felt like he couldn't cross.

**Q** There was this dialogue in the film about how people who are LGBTQ or different than most people who live there, eventually just move. What is the latest update on Archer's two nieces and their friend Maddie?

**A** Osline: Both Crystal and Michelle are going to college. They're going to Ohio State. But Maddie has a very interesting story. She's taking care of her two siblings and her grandmother. Maddie is really sweet and dedicated to her family. Even though Maddie

said she's going to get out of there as soon as she can, I anticipate that Maddie will probably stay in the community for a while. One of her goals is to send her siblings off to college and they're under 10 right now.

**Q** Have they seen the film and has it been shown in Ohio?

**A** Osline: Maddie shared it with her mom. She really loved it. Crystal loved it. Michelle, I think, felt a little embarrassed, but overall the response is very positive. We were sad that we weren't able to go back this year and share it with more people. We would have probably shown it in the town if it weren't for COVID.

Stallings: Right now, we're reaching out to a lot of the LGBTQ organizations in Ohio to try to make it free to their members to view for a limited time. There's a big community in Dayton, an organization called Stonewall Columbus.

Osline: I'm very interested in doing more films about this gray area in the idea of community and suppression. I've always wanted to say this — I worked a number of years for local government in Huntington Beach. I left that job about 10 years ago and I swore I would never use the word "community" again. The reason I say that is because I often saw the word deployed as a term of exclusion, in terms of what the community didn't want. In local politics, you could see how people would be able to resolve their differences because you're looking right at the person and eventually you have to come to some kind of resolution. But national politics as it is today with neighbors pitted against neighbors, it's going to be a real challenge.

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